The genesis of the world-renowned Mighty Clouds of Joy can be traced back to the
group’s founder, the charismatic and reservedly shy Bedile Goldsmith, who managed
and sang tenor with the Angels of Joy Quartet out of South-Central Los Angeles during
the 1980s. Goldsmith was born in 1918 in Montgomery, Alabama. With his mother
Fannie Perdue, and father Jim Goldsmith, an accomplished guitarist, the young Bedile
attended The Beautiful Zion Church at Sandy Ridge. It was at Beautiful Zion that Bedile
Goldsmith picked up the singing bug. In the late 1930s, Bedile along with brothers Joe,
Early B., James, and Willis, formed a spiritual singing quartet called the Nightingales,
but the onset of World War II forced the group to split up.

Some brothers chose to stay in Alabama, others left for Michigan, but Bedile
preferred the sunny climes of Southern California. Shortly after taking up residence in
LA., Goldsmith hooked up with The Los Angeles Spiritual Singers. The young Tony
Harris (who later switched to R&B and enjoyed a regional hit, “Chicken baby chicken” on
Ebb in 1957) also served in the Los Angeles Spiritual Singers. The LA. Spiritual Singers
cut a slew of songs for Dolphin’s of Hollywood Records.

Like his father, Goldsmith acquired a guitar and taught himself a few rudimentary
chords. In 1949 Goldsmith organized the first in a string of “Joy”- tagged “shout”
quartets called the Flowers of Joy. Among temporary residents in the Flowers of Joy was one Clay Hammond from Fort Worth, Texas. Goldsmith's Flowers of Joy were aurally a prototype of the Mighty Clouds of Joy. Some time towards the close of 1954, Clay Hammond in a meeting with Goldsmith mentioned that a bunch of Watts District gospel singing kids he knew (some still in high school) needed advice, guidance, and a manager and asked if Goldsmith could go out and hear them, perhaps give a few pointers.

The kids rehearsed regularly at high school student Little Willie Joe Ligon's parents' house. Little Joe was born in Troy, Alabama on September 11, 1942. Joe's grandfather was an old country preacher in a small hamlet called Elem, some fifty miles from Montgomery. Joe's father also attended the same church and even formed a gospel quartet out of members of the church. Young Joe used to go to see his father's group sing and was inspired to form his own outfit. It was Joe's mother Bernice who helped gather cousins, and with more support from the family Joe's first quartet became a reality. But Joe wanted to do better and in early 1954 moved out to Los Angeles to stay with his uncle for a few months before moving to his parents' house.

Goldsmith with curiosity, and a well used guitar in hand, took a trip out to the Ligon residence on one of their rehearsal nights. Standing in the Ligon living room with Jerome Brown, Johnnie Gibson, Freddie Johnson and his brother, was a little guy way in back called Little Willie Joe Ligon. Goldsmith took a seat, picked up his guitar, and strummed a few chords so that he could hear how well the boys blended in harmony. Freddie Johnson's brother was the elected lead singer at that time. When Goldsmith heard the group sing, he figured something was not right. The song they had chosen to sing did not sound the way it should be sung. From the back of the room came the voice of Little Willie Joe. "Let me have a try!" he pleaded. When Goldsmith heard Little Willie Joe sing he knew he could make something happen with the boys. This did not sit too well with Freddie Johnson's brother who stormed out of rehearsal and was rarely ever seen again.

During the period the group took shape, Tony Harris, Clay Hammond, and Johnny Martin all sang as members but only Johnny Martin became a permanent fixture. Christened by Goldsmith "The Mighty Clouds of Joy," the quartet played local venues, catching the attention of record spinners like Thomas Wells, Hunter Hancock, Joe White, and Joe Matthews.

In 1955 the group signed with the fledgling Proverb Records on South Central Avenue in Pacoima, owned and operated by Milton Rose and Brother Duke Henderson. While Rose took a back seat in dealing with gospel music talent, vice president Henderson took full charge of the artists. Brother Henderson re-christened the group the Mighty Mighty Clouds of Joy to add more thunder to an already hard, loud singing group.

Brother Duke Henderson in his teens waxed as a blues crooner for the Apollo label out of Harlem in the mid- forties. Then as part of the LA. Central Avenue club singer scene, he waxed for many L.A. indies. In the early fifties, Henderson became a disc jockey and hosted a back-to-back gospel and R & B show over KPOP. It was during his tenure at KPOP that the Mighty Clouds of Joy were brought to his attention. Henderson later turned his back on the devil's music, became a man of the cloth and pastored The Bethany Apostle Community Church at 8438 South Hoover Street.
In 1955, the Mighty Mighty Clouds of Joy consisted of Goldsmith, Little Willie Joe Ligon, Freddie Jackson, Jerome Brown, Johnny Wesley, Johnnie Gibson and Johnny Martin. Goldsmith’s guitar picking was the quartet’s only accompaniment. Brother Henderson first recorded the Mighty Mighty Clouds of Joy at The Unident Church on 87th and Broadway in 1956. The Rev. T.M. Chambers was the pastor. (Chambers also recorded for Proverb.)

The Sensational Wonders out of The New Kingdom Baptist Church shared concert billing. Two, possibly three, songs were taped -- “Amazing Grace,” lead by the power-packed pipes of Little Willie Joe Ligon, “Take me to the water,” again lead by Little Willie Joe in sanctified fashion plus a straight reading of “Old time religion” lead by the formal Brother Henderson himself. All three songs were issued on the “Let’s Have Church” Proverb album of 1959. “Amazing Grace” and “Old time religion” were recorded by radio station XERB. “Old time religion” was also released on the GPA label. All were reissued by Hob Records (a Scepter subsidiary) in 1968 on an album entitled “The Mighty Clouds of Joy Sing “Live” Zion Songs” produced by John Bowden. Bowden virtually wrecked the material with out of sync piano, bass, and drum overdubs.

In 1957 The Mighty Mighty Clouds of Joy were recorded at a church in Riverside. Both Tony Harris and Little Willie Joe Ligon shared leads during the program. Only one song was recorded at the service, “A Christian’s Plea” (“Amazing Grace,”) lead by guest soloist Tony Harris who was at that time on the brink of crossing over into R & B. A shorter version of “Christian’s Plea” appears on the group’s 45 release (Proverb 100) and is included on the Proverb album as well as the Hob collection with overdubs. A mystery recording appears on both albums. The singer sounds remarkably like Tony Harris performing a traditional reading of “Old time religion” backed by an unidentified congregation. Goldsmith asserted that Harris never recorded “Old time religion” in the presence of the Mighty Mighty Clouds of Joy.

In 1958 Proverb released “You woke me up this morning” backed with the aforementioned “A Christian’s Plea” accompanied solely by the guitar figures of Bedile Goldsmith. The record became a tremendous success on Brother Henderson’s KPOP radio show.

Some time around this period the Mighty Mighty Clouds of Joy played Reverend Wesley’s church in Watts at Eighty-Eighth and Bandera. A live version of “Lord you woke me up this morning” led by the fiery Little Willie Joe was recorded by sound engineers from XERB. The song became the group’s most popular chart and was issued a total of five times. Aside from the one release previously mentioned, the song came out on GPA, the two album collections plus on the Clouds’ second single release (Proverb 1023), pressed during the group’s increasing success on Peacock in the mid-Sixties. The flip side featured a fine audience-dubbed rendition of “Jesus is real” led by Little Willie Joe, a song recorded at the Unident studio in Inglewood.

In 1959 the Mighty Mighty Clouds played Will Rogers Park in Watts. Only one song from the concert “(My) Jesus, (My) Jesus “ ever saw release. The song was featured on both the Proverb and Hob albums.

Our saga continues with a quartet called the Stars of Bethel out of Memphis, Tennessee. One of the group’s featured soloists was Little Johnny Taylor who switched to soul music in 1962. The Stars of Bethel moved to Los Angeles some time during the late 1950s and were absorbed into a group called the Sensational Wonders who recorded for Fable Records after Little Johnny Taylor’s departure. Catching the
notice of Jake Porter, they recorded a second single release on Combo Records which, without the prerequisite promotion, sank without trace. Changing names, they also recorded a single release for John Fullbright’s Elko label as the Sensational Clouds of Joy.

By the spring of 1960 multi-alias Mighty Clouds of Joy had broadened their popularity considerably. Travel became more and more a necessity as the group found itself working almost constantly. The majority of the group’s original members had quit during the Wonder’s merger, with the exception of Little Willie Joe Ligon and Johnny Martin.

Bedile Goldsmith quit as manager and Ermant Franklin Jr. from Austin stepped in to fill his shoes. A freshly reconstructed Mighty Mighty Clouds of Joy was put together out of the seminal members of the Sensational Wonders. They were Ligon and David “Bunker Hill” Walker, first and second lead, Ernest and Elmer Franklin, Johnny Martin, Leon Polk and Richard Wallace who doubled on guitar. Elmer Franklin was the son of a minister from Oakland, California, Leon Polk also hailed from Austin, Texas as did David “Bunker Hill” Walker, and guitarist Richard Wallace. Wallace played guitar on the Alpha-Omega Singers’ 1958 Peacock session so he had had dealings with Don Robey.

During the summer of 1960, under Goldsmith’s stewardship, the Mighty Mighty Clouds of Joy were taken to Ted Brinson’s recording studio where the group cut a demo remake of “Sinner’s confession” with Goldsmith himself filling in on the baritone part. “Sinner’s confession” was sent to Don Robey at Peacock Records in Houston--Robey was impressed by the group’s potential. He signed the outfit to a long-term contract in September 1960.

The first thing Robey did was to insist that the group change names to the Mighty Clouds of Joy as he felt two Mightys were an overstatement. Both Little Joe and David Walker were given to dramatic sanctification when it came to vocal interpretations. “Hard singers” like Louis Johnson with the Swan Silvertones and Jet Bledsoe with the Spirit of Memphis were still very much in vogue. On the first Peacock singles release, Little Joe sang lead on “Ain’t got long here,” a fiery, mid-tempo chart that battled for sales in the South against such competitors as Robert Washington’s (and the Gospelaires’) “I’ve got it.”

“Ain’t got long here” was featured on T.V. Gospel Time and became quite a successful seller in Southern markets. This debut was followed by five singles releases during 1961 and 1962. The best remembered was the Clouds’ anthem “Family circle” which was picked to title their first album collection in 1963. The collection was highlighted with Little Joe’s classics like the throat-scrapping “I came to Jesus” and “Amazing Grace.” The sermonette came into fashion and Little Joe made good use of it on “I’ll go,” a pyrotechnic opus culled for their second album release – “A Bright Side” – in 1965. The group found themselves on the road filling engagements throughout the South and across the country most of 1966. “A Bright Side” sold well for the quartet.

They scarcely had time to record the two singles they were able to make. By now the Mighty Clouds of Joy were being referred to as “The Temptations of Gospel” with their loud, colored suits and fancy choreography. The choice of image turned out to be a success and young female fans were as excitedly hysterical as one would find at a soul music concert.
The line-up stayed pretty solid, with the exception of ex-Harmonizing Four basso Jimmy Jones stepping in on occasion to help balance out the top-heavy blend of singing. It was this same line-up that brought us their fabulously exciting live album, recorded at The Music Hall in Houston in 1967. The Clouds pulled out all their best-selling songs and completely set fire to the auditorium with them. Despite this the Clouds were still in need of crossover material. For as long as their recordings sold well to a loyal black audience, they did not have to worry about keeping up with current trends.

That same year and again in 1968 the Mighty Clouds of Joy won the World’s Championship Quartet Battle, netting them an enormous cup, one which rivalled even the largest given to the winners of The World Series. Peacock issued “The Best of Mighty Clouds” followed by “Presenting the Untouchables” to celebrate the group’s climb to the top. This album is loaded with goodies including “Child of the King” and “I’ll trust in God.”

1969 marked the release of the Clouds’ tribute album to the legendary Rev. Julius Cheeks entitled “Sing Songs of Rev. Julius Cheeks and the Nightingales.” The ten-tune set includes remakes of “What would you give” and “Just a closer walk” lead by Cheeks himself. The songs were chosen from Cheeks’ most glorious period, 1957-1959. In 1970 the Clouds’ “God Bless America” album was issued. This was at the time Nixon had intensified the bombing in North Vietnam, our incursion into Cambodia and the Kent State student killings. The music is good but the back sleeve is printed with the words “Oh!!! What price glory? In this day and time the Mighty Clouds of Joy lend their voices, and ask ...God Bless America.” It seems Americans were more concerned about the worsening situation in Vietnam than in buying gospel music to alleviate their sorrows.

The Clouds had to wait two years before the release of their “Live... at the Apollo Theatre” album which turned out every bit as sanctified as the Music Hall release of 1967.

The decline of gospel on black radio lead the group to turn more towards the popular mainstream with the necessary rolling over onto ABC Records in 1973. This change ended up with a plunge into the gospo-disco scene. They eventually came to the conclusion that they were too physically challenged to meet the needs of the music’s exhausting demands and returned in 1977 to the message songs their many loyal fans were eager to enjoy. Before this, their fourth ABC album, “It’s Time” cut in 1974 under the guidance of Philadelphia’s Gamble and Huff, was their break into the mainstream they were seeking. The “It’s time” single climbed to #32 on Billboard’s R&B chart.

Not long after, a second single, “Mighty cloud of joy,” made it up to #47 in the same chart. In 1976, the Clouds shot up to the 22nd R&B placing with “Ride mighty high” from their “Kickin’” album. In 1977, The Clouds played at the Carter White House, a notable highlight. A year later, the Clouds were nominated for a Grammy for their ABC “God Is Not Dead” collection. That same year they grabbed a Grammy for their “Live and Direct” album. From ABC they moved over to Epic and won yet another Grammy for their “Changing Times” LP. This was in 1979.

In 1982 the Clouds enjoyed three album releases. The second, titled “Miracle Man,” was nominated for a Grammy as was the third, “Mighty Clouds Above” recorded live at the Montreux Jazz Festival. This last set is a standout and the best Clouds album recorded in a decade. An additional Grammy came their way in 1985 when their
album “Cloudburst” produced by Al McKay and issued by Myrrh drew nationwide acclaim. To add more of a convincing edge to the group, the great, notable gospel falsetto Paul Beasley quit the Gospel Keynotes and joined the Clouds. During a tour of Japan in 1987, founding member Johnny Martin died and was replaced by Dwight Gordon.

In 1990, the Clouds were awarded yet another Grammy for their Word album “Pray For Me.”

In recent times, the Clouds have opened for Ray Charles, the Rolling Stones, Paul Simon plus a host of others too numerous to call. Paul Simon also co-produced a Clouds album. Sadly, long-standing member Elmer (“Elmo”) Franklin died in 2008. Two years later founding member, singer and guitarist Richard Wallace broke from the group to form his own edition of the Mighty Clouds of Joy. The parent outfit’s last album issued by M.C.G. in 2013 was entitled “All That I Am Chapter 1,” a potpourri of contemporary and traditional songs sung in the inimitable Clouds’ way. Soldiers in the group include Little Willie Joe Ligon, lead, Michael McCowin and Ron Staples, co-leads, Johnny Valentine who doubles on drums plus guitarist Ervin Williams. Looks like the Clouds will never fade from view.

-- Opal Louis Nations, November 2013